



CULTURAL DIPLOMACY THROUGH CUISINE: INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE ON KIMCHI

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Info Article	Abstract: <i>This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to explore international students' perceptions of kimchi. While many students are introduced to kimchi through Hallyu media or globalized Korean restaurants prior to arrival, their direct encounters in South Korea often reshape or challenge these expectations. Drawing on cultural discourse analysis and interview data, the research examines both the symbolic and sensory dimensions of kimchi. As a UNESCO-recognized cultural heritage, kimchi embodies resilience, collectivism, and Korean identity, yet its pungency and spiciness can pose challenges to adaptation. The findings suggest that food is not merely a source of sustenance but a cultural text that mediates identity, belonging, and diplomacy. By addressing both empirical and theoretical gaps in intercultural research, this study demonstrates that kimchi functions simultaneously as a cultural bridge and a boundary marker, underscoring the centrality of food in education and cultural diplomacy.</i>
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<p><i>Licensed Under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License</i></p> 	<p>Abstrak: Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif untuk mengeksplorasi persepsi mahasiswa internasional terhadap kimchi. Meskipun banyak mahasiswa diperkenalkan dengan kimchi melalui media Hallyu atau restoran Korea yang sudah mendunia sebelum kedatangan mereka, pengalaman langsung di Korea Selatan sering kali membentuk ulang atau bahkan menantang ekspektasi tersebut. Dengan menggunakan analisis wacana budaya dan data wawancara, penelitian ini menelaah dimensi simbolik sekaligus sensori dari kimchi. Sebagai warisan budaya takbenda yang diakui UNESCO, kimchi merepresentasikan ketahanan, kolektivitas, dan identitas Korea, meskipun rasa pedas dan asamnya dapat menjadi tantangan dalam proses adaptasi. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa makanan bukan sekadar sumber pemenuhan gizi, melainkan teks budaya yang memediasi identitas, rasa memiliki, dan diplomasi. Dengan mengatasi kesenjangan empiris dan teoretis dalam penelitian lintas budaya, studi ini menunjukkan bahwa kimchi berfungsi sekaligus sebagai jembatan budaya dan penanda batas, menegaskan sentralitas makanan dalam pendidikan dan diplomasi budaya.</p>

INTRODUCTION

Every year, thousands of international students travel to South Korea for degree and exchange programs, contributing to a growing community of cultural intermediaries. In 2010, there were more than 83,000 international students in South Korea (KEDI, 2010; Kwon, 2013), and by 2020 this number had surpassed 150,000, highlighting South Korea's emergence as an educational hub in Asia (OECD, 2021). Although the COVID-19 pandemic temporarily slowed mobility, the flow of international students has continued, supported by government policies that promote internationalization as part of South Korea's global competitiveness strategy (Byun & Kim, 2011). These educational dynamics also align with broader bilateral frameworks such as the Indonesia–Korea Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (IK-CEPA), which is viewed as creating opportunities not only in trade but also in education and cultural cooperation (Maulidita & Darmanto, 2024). For international students, cultural diplomacy takes place not only in classrooms but also in everyday life, with food serving as a major site of cultural negotiation.

Among Korean foods, kimchi is the most recognizable and symbolically charged. Defined as a fermented vegetable dish, typically made with cabbage and radish, kimchi has long been associated with resilience, survival, and collective labor. Beyond its nutritional value, kimchi functions as a cultural marker that embodies Korea's historical experiences of scarcity, adaptation, and community solidarity. Kimchi has significant role as a national symbol that reflects Korea's cultural continuity and shared identity across generations (Cwierka & Walraven, 2002; Cho, 2006). In addition, Smith's (1991) framework of national identity highlights the role of mass public culture in reinforcing belonging, a criterion that kimchi fulfills through its ubiquitous consumption across all strata of Korean society, from family dining tables to school cafeterias and high-end restaurants. In this way, kimchi bridges the everyday and the symbolic, simultaneously nourishing the body and affirming cultural identity.

Kimchi's cultural significance is further underscored by its inscription on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list under Kimjang—the communal preparation and sharing of kimchi. This recognition highlights values of cooperation, reciprocity, and sustainability (UNESCO, 2013). Kimjang is not merely about food preservation; it is a cultural ritual in which families and communities gather to make large quantities of kimchi in preparation for winter. As Surya and Lee (2022) explain, kimjang symbolizes

interdependence, collective responsibility, and harmony with the natural environment, principles that resonate deeply with Korean social values. These communal practices are often novel to international students, many of whom come from individualistic societies where food preparation is typically privatized or commercialized.

Additionally, kimchi has gained global prominence as part of the Korean Wave (Hallyu). International students are often already familiar with kimchi before arriving in Korea, having encountered it through popular culture, social media, or restaurants abroad (Jang et al., 2015). Research on remote acculturation in Indonesia further shows that Hallyu media content significantly shapes pre-arrival cultural familiarity and expectations (Maulidita et al., 2024). Korean dramas, in particular, frequently feature mealtime scenes where kimchi is central, embedding the dish into global imaginary of Korean culture (Jin, 2016). Thus, kimchi becomes one of the first cultural symbols international students expect to experience firsthand, bridging media representations with lived reality.

This study is guided by two central research questions that frame the role of food in cultural adaptation. First, it explores how well international students are acquainted with Korean food, particularly kimchi, before their arrival in South Korea. Given the global reach of Korean popular culture and the proliferation of Korean restaurants worldwide, many students encounter kimchi through media or diaspora communities prior to direct experience (Jin, 2016; Kwon & Arzubiaga, 2017). Second, it examines how their perceptions of kimchi are validated, reshaped, or challenged after living in South Korea and consuming the dish in its cultural context. These questions underscore the importance of food not only as a medium of everyday sustenance but also as a channel of cultural diplomacy and identity negotiation in the context of international education (Liu & Morgan, 2022).

International students typically arrive in South Korea during the spring and fall semesters, where they have opportunities to experience the country's cultural distinctiveness. Their perspectives, shaped by both lived experiences and peer-to-peer exchanges, provide valuable insights that can help address empirical and theoretical gaps in this field of study. Despite the importance of food in cultural exchange, much of the existing literature on the globalization of Korean cuisine has concentrated either on domestic consumption within Korea (Cho, 2006; Chung et al., 2016) or on the spread of kimchi abroad through diaspora communities (Collins, 2008; Watson, 2005). Far less

attention, however, has been devoted to the experiences of international students—an increasingly significant demographic in Korean universities—and their encounters with kimchi in its cultural context. This underexplored dimension highlights both an empirical and theoretical gap that this study seeks to address.

The empirical gap lies in the way kimchi is often presented to international students without contextual explanation. For many, the dish simply appears on their tray or table, detached from the cultural narratives that give it meaning. Yet, as food anthropologists such as Cwiertka (2002) remind us, the significance of food is inseparable from its cultural and historical background. Without this narrative dimension, international students may experience kimchi only as a sensory profile—spicy, sour, or pungent—without appreciating its deeper role as a cultural artifact. Providing background stories, such as the communal practice of kimjang or kimchi’s importance in sustaining Koreans during wartime, can transform the act of eating into an act of cultural learning (Surya & Lee, 2022).

The theoretical gap concerns how food experiences are conceptualized within intercultural research. Much of the existing literature on international students emphasizes adaptation to academic environments (Kwon, 2013), while food is often treated as peripheral. However, scholars such as Berry (1997) and Choe and Kim (2018) demonstrate that food adaptation is a central component of cultural acculturation. Examining kimchi through this lens allows us to see not only how students adjust their diets but also how they negotiate identity, belonging, and cultural boundaries. This study addresses an underexplored gap by examining how international students experience kimchi not only as food but as a site of cultural adaptation, bridging the empirical absence of contextual explanation with the theoretical neglect of food in intercultural research.

METHOD

From a methodological perspective, this study adopts a qualitative interpretive approach that integrates a review of secondary literature with interview excerpts from international students. This design is particularly appropriate for exploring food and cultural adaptation, as it allows for a nuanced understanding of how individuals construct meaning around everyday practices. The analysis is grounded in cultural discourse analysis, which emphasizes how meanings are co-constructed through interaction and

embedded within cultural contexts (Carbaugh, 2007). Within this framework, students' testimonies are treated as cultural texts that not only reveal the intersections of personal taste, cultural background, and symbolic identity but also highlight the ways in which global cultural flows are negotiated in local, lived experiences. By foregrounding the voices of international students, this methodology captures both the micro-level dynamics of individual adaptation and the broader discourses of cultural diplomacy that shape their experiences.

This approach also builds on existing studies in food nationalism, globalization, and gastrodiplomacy to situate students' perspectives within wider scholarly debates. Cho (2006) and Chung et al. (2016) frame kimchi as central to Korean national identity, while Collins (2008) and Watson (2005) highlight its significance in globalization and culinary transnationalism. Reynolds (2012) and Rockower (2014) extend this discussion by conceptualizing food as a form of soft power, suggesting that kimchi functions as a tool of cultural diplomacy. Complementing these cultural analyses, recent work on linguistic diplomacy demonstrates how Korean language education operates as a vehicle for strengthening bilateral relations (Darmanto et al., 2025), while studies of student satisfaction with Korean language programs reveal how learning experiences shape perceptions of Korean culture (Izzulhaq et al., 2025). By synthesizing these perspectives with the lived experiences of international students, this study addresses both empirical and theoretical gaps in the literature on food, language, and intercultural adaptation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Interviews with international students highlight not only the popularity of kimchi but also the multiple ways in which it is encountered, interpreted, and remembered across cultural contexts. Today, kimchi is no longer confined to Korean households or restaurants in Seoul but it has become a globalized food product with strong symbolic resonance. Local communities across the globe now recognize Korean cuisine as part of the international food scene, with many cities hosting Korean restaurants or specialty shops where kimchi is sold. This global availability demonstrates how Korean food has become both a culinary commodity and a medium of cultural diplomacy, shaping perceptions of Korea far beyond its borders.

“There are several Korean restaurants in Makassar, South Sulawesi. My family and I usually go there to celebrate special occasions. I have been consuming kimchi since then, but it tastes completely different from the one I tried in Seoul.

Also, knowing the cultural background changes my perspective about kimchi's existence as an important part of the Korean meal set" (Rifqi, 2022).

This testimony illustrates two key dynamics. First, it underscores the globalization of Korean food, as kimchi is readily available in cities far removed from Korea. Previous studies have documented the rapid spread of Korean cuisine across Southeast Asia, demonstrating how Korean restaurants function as spaces of cultural contact and culinary adaptation (Han & Choi, 2019). These restaurants often become symbolic meeting points where locals engage with Korean culture through taste, even when they have never visited Korea. Second, Rifqi points to the sensory gap between globalized versions of kimchi and its authentic Korean counterpart, which tends to be fresher, spicier, and more pungent. As Kim and Cheong (2011) explain, the sensory qualities of kimchi inevitably shift when adapted to local ingredients and palates, producing products that can be vastly different from those consumed in Korea. His recognition that contextual knowledge—such as the story of kimjang or kimchi's wartime importance—enriched his appreciation reveals the pedagogical value of attaching cultural narratives to food. In this sense, kimchi is not only consumed but also “learned,” transforming a meal into a site of cultural education.

“Kimchi has been the spiciest food I have ever tried since I grew up in a Mediterranean household. When I tried kimchi earlier in Spain, the taste was a little bit bland. Coming to South Korea, the kimchi here is way spicier than the one I had in Spain. It represents almost all Korean food, which is popular for its spiciness” (Rojano, 2022).

For Rojano, kimchi epitomizes the Korean palate, especially its strong association with spiciness. His account reveals how sensory experiences shape broader cultural perceptions. While Koreans may view spiciness as a sign of vitality, passion, or warmth, Mediterranean eaters may perceive it as excessive or uncomfortable. Such differences highlight the cultural relativity of taste, where the same flavor can signify pleasure in one culture but discomfort in another (Rozin, 1996). Scientific analyses confirm that Korean kimchi contains higher levels of capsaicin and lactic acid than many versions produced abroad, resulting in its characteristic pungency (Park et al., 2012). Cross-cultural studies further show that international consumers often perceive kimchi as one of the most challenging Korean foods to adapt to, precisely because of its strong flavor intensity (Lee & Lee, 2009). Rojano's experience exemplifies how sensory encounters can influence

cultural judgments, reinforcing the idea that taste is both biological and socially constructed.

“Knowing kimchi from Korean dramas, this side dish is famous as one of the must-have items in a Korean meal. One particular drama also showed how kimchi is produced by fermenting cabbage and mixing it with chili powder and seasoning. Coming to South Korea, I realized that kimchi is not my type of dish. The spiciness is beyond my tolerance, and the sourness does not fit my preference” (Wulan, 2022).

Wulan’s testimony reflects the powerful role of media in shaping pre-arrival expectations. Korean dramas have served as effective tools of soft power, popularizing not only music and fashion but also food (Reynolds, 2012). Empirical studies confirm that Hallyu content has heightened international audiences’ curiosity about Korean cuisine, with kimchi frequently depicted in family or dining scenes (Choi & Kim, 2014). Yet her eventual rejection of kimchi underscores the limitations of cultural diplomacy through food. Sensory acceptance research consistently identifies sourness and spiciness as the greatest barriers to kimchi’s global adaptation, with many international consumers reporting difficulty adjusting to these profiles (Kim et al., 2018). Wulan’s case illustrates that while media can generate curiosity and expectation, sensory realities ultimately shape the boundaries of acceptance. In this way, food diplomacy operates within both symbolic and physiological constraints.

Taken together, these three testimonies highlight both the promise and limits of kimchi as a medium of cultural exchange. On the one hand, its unique taste and deep cultural symbolism make it an authentic marker of Korean identity and a powerful tool of soft power. On the other, its pungency and spiciness can alienate those unaccustomed to such flavors. This duality reflects what Watson (2005) described in his study of the Big Mac in China: foods can simultaneously symbolize modernity, belonging, or identity while also producing dissonance or rejection.



Figure 1. Kimchi as side dishes

Source: processed data

As these narratives reveal, kimchi is more than a side dish; it is a living cultural text that international students encounter, interpret, and respond to in diverse ways. Its global presence and symbolic weight make it a significant vehicle of cultural diplomacy, even if its taste does not appeal universally. The experience of kimchi demonstrates that food is never merely consumed—it is interpreted, negotiated, and remembered, leaving lasting impressions on how cultures are understood across borders.

For international students, the experience of kimchi also intersects with broader processes of adaptation. Some integrate kimchi into their diets, signaling openness and cultural acceptance, while others reject it, maintaining dietary boundaries. Both responses are legitimate and reflect Berry's (1997) acculturation strategies of assimilation, integration, separation, or marginalization. Thus, kimchi becomes more than nourishment: it becomes a medium through which cultural boundaries are drawn, negotiated, or dissolved. Importantly, the act of eating—or refusing to eat—kimchi is never neutral; it embodies personal identity, health beliefs, and perceptions of belonging within Korean society (Janowski, 2012).

The worldwide popularity of Korean restaurants further illustrates the global reach of kimchi. Once regarded as exotic, kimchi has become increasingly familiar across diverse cultural settings, though often adapted to suit local palates. For international students, tasting kimchi in South Korea provides a rare opportunity to compare these globalized variations with the “authentic” version, deepening their understanding of how foods evolve across contexts (Bestor, 2000; Buettner, 2008). Such comparisons also reveal the complex processes by which foods are translated and transformed, a phenomenon Heldke (2003) describes as “cultural food colonialism.” In this process, traditional foods are appropriated and reinterpreted by global audiences, sometimes diluting their original meanings but simultaneously expanding their visibility, accessibility, and symbolic power.

Ultimately, kimchi functions simultaneously as a cultural bridge and a cultural boundary marker. For some students, it becomes an entry point into Korean identity and everyday social life; for others, its strong flavors remain a point of distance. What remains constant, however, is kimchi's symbolic power as a culinary ambassador of Korea. As South Korea continues to expand its global influence through the Korean Wave (Hallyu), kimchi will remain central to the negotiation of intercultural identities. It stands as a tangible example of how food can operate as soft power, cultural diplomacy,

and a lived site of adaptation, shaping not only what people eat but also how they come to understand themselves and others in an interconnected world.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that food—particularly kimchi—plays a central role in the intercultural experiences of international students in South Korea. While many arrive with preconceptions shaped by media or prior encounters with globalized versions of Korean cuisine, their direct experiences with kimchi often reshape or challenge those expectations. The findings confirm that food functions not only as sustenance but also as a symbolic and experiential medium through which cultural identity and belonging are negotiated.

By examining students' testimonies, this research highlights both the potential and the limitations of kimchi as a tool of cultural diplomacy. On the one hand, its symbolic resonance, historical depth, and ubiquity in Korean society make it a powerful cultural marker. On the other hand, its pungency, spiciness, and sourness can alienate those unaccustomed to such strong flavors. These dualities illustrate how food can act as both a cultural bridge and a cultural barrier, reinforcing the argument that taste is simultaneously biological and socially constructed.

Finally, this study contributes to broader discussions of food, globalization, and intercultural adaptation by addressing both an empirical and theoretical gap in literature. Empirically, it foregrounds the experiences of inbound international students, a demographic often overlooked in studies of Korean food. Theoretically, it advances an understanding of food as integral to cultural acculturation, rather than peripheral. In doing so, the study underscores kimchi's enduring role as a site of negotiation, learning, and identity formation in international education, while also reinforcing its significance as a vehicle of Korean soft power and cultural diplomacy.

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